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IMAGES OF WAR

This is the seventh book issued by the Beaumont Press and the third printed by hand 30 copies have been printed on Japanese vellum signed by the author and artist and numbered 1 to 30 50 copies on cartridge paper numbered 31 to 80 and 120 copies on hand-made paper numbered 81 to 200.

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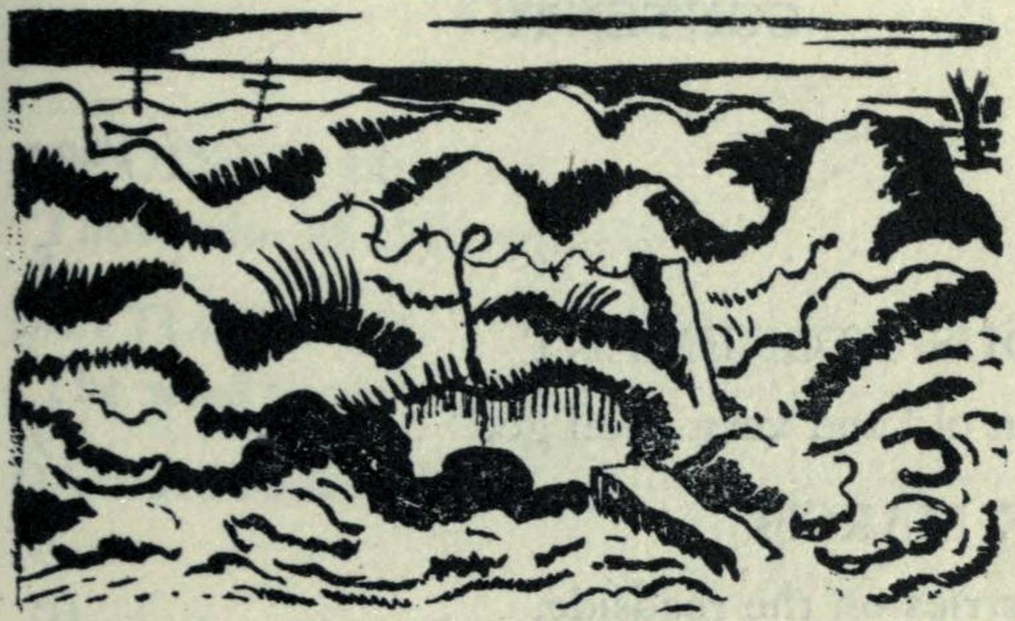
IMAGES OF WAR

A BOOK OF POEMS BY

RICHARD ALDINGTON

LOAN STACK



PROEM

OUT of this turmoil and passion,
This implacable contest,
This vast sea of effort,
I would gather something of repose,
Some intuition of the inalterable gods,
Some Attic gesture.

Each day I grow more restless,
See the austere shape elude me,
Gaze impotently upon a thousand miseries
And still am dumb.

May, 1917

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VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

THIS is an old and very cruel god . . .
We will endure;
We will try not to wince
When he crushes and rends us.

If indeed it is for your sakes,
If we perish or moan in torture,
Or stagger under sordid burdens
That you may live—
Then we can endure.

If our wasted blood
Makes bright the page
Of poets yet to be;
If this our tortured life
Save from destruction's nails
Gold words of a Greek long dead;
Then we can endure,
Then hope,
Then watch the sun rise
Without utter bitterness.

But, O thou old and very cruel god,
Take, if thou canst, this bitter cup from us.

ON THE MARCH

BRIGHT BERRIES on the roadside,
Clear among your dusty leaves,
Red, mottled berries,
You are as beautiful
As the points of a girl's breasts;
You are as firm and fresh . . .

Beauty of the morning sun
Among the red berries
Of early September,
You tear at my breast,
Your light crushes me
With memory of freedom lost
And warm hours blotted out.

I will throw away rifle and leather belt,
Straps, khaki and heavy nailed boots,
And run naked across the dewy grass
Among the firm red berries!
I will be free
And sing of beauty and the women of Hellas,
Of rent seas and the peace of olive gardens,
Of these rough meadows,
Of the keen welcome of London mud!
I will be free . . .

Party—HALT!

DAWN

THE grim dawn lightens thin bleak clouds;
In the hill clefts beyond the flooded meadows
Lies death-pale, death-still mist.

We trudge along wearily,
Heavy with lack of sleep,
Spiritless, yet with pretence of gaiety.

The sun brings crimson to the colourless sky;
Light gleams from brass and steel—
We trudge on wearily—

O God, end this bleak anguish
Soon, soon, with vivid crimson death,
End it in mist-pale sleep!

SORCERY OF WORDS

THE POETRY OF WINTER—these words, remembered from some aesthetic essay, return to my mind with an ironic persistence.

It happened yesterday when the ground was sheeted in frost, the sky rose upon the pale green coverlet of dawn, bare trees silhouetted, frozen pools of water.

'The poetry of winter'—yes, that was poetry, the breath of the gods,—light glowing and changing, motionless trees, clear air.

Yes, one can be hungry, sore, unshaven, dirty, eyes and head aching, limbs shivering, and yet love beauty.

From the depths I cry it, from the depths which echo with the ironic phrase 'the poetry of winter,' from the depths I cry it!

You, who are clean and warm in the delicate leisure of a flower-scented library, strain your hearing, listen across the clamour of the age, for a whisper that comes to you so faintly, so ironically—'the poetry of winter!'

FATIGUES

THE weariness of this dirt and labour, of this dirty, melting sky!

For hours we have carried great bundles of hay from barge to truck, and from truck to train.

The weariness of this dirt and labour! But—look! Last June those heavy dried bales waved and glittered in the fields of England!

Cinque-foil, and clover, buttercups, fennel, thistle and rue—daisy and ragged robin, wild rose from the hedge, shepherd's purse and long sweet nodding stalks of grass!

Fatigues

Heart of me, heart of me, be not sick and faint though fingers and arms and head ache; you bear the gift of the glittering meadows of England. Here are bundles from Somerset, from Wales, from Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester—names we must love, scented with summer peace.

Handle them bravely, meadow-sweet, sorrel, lush flag and arid knap-weed, flowers of marsh and cliff, handle them bravely!

Dear crushed flowers! And you, yet fragrant grasses, I stoop and kiss you furtively.

Dear gentle perished sisters, speak, whisper once more, tell me next June again you will dance and whisper in the wind.

OUR HANDS

I AM GRIEVED for our hands, our hands that have caressed roses and women's flesh, old lovely books and marbles of Carrara. I am grieved for our hands that were so reverent in beauty's service, so glad of beauty of tressed hair and silken robe and gentle fingers, so glad of beauty of bronze and wood and stone and rustling parchment. So glad, so reverent, so white.

I am grieved for our hands . . .

IN THE TRENCHES

I

NOT THAT WE are weary,
Not that we fear,
Not that we are lonely
Though never alone—
Not these, not these destroy us;
But that each rush and crash
Of mortar and shell,
Each cruel bitter shriek of bullet
That tears the wind like a blade,
Each wound on the breast of earth,
Of Demeter, our Mother,
Wounds us also,

In the Trenches.

Severs and rends the fine fabric
Of the wings of our frail souls,
Scatters into dust the bright wings
Of Psyche!

II

Impotent,
How impotent is all this clamour,
This destruction and contest . . .

Night after night comes the moon
Haughty and perfect;
Night after night the Pleiades sing
And Orion swings his belt across the sky.
Night after night the frost
Crumbles the hard earth.

Soon the spring will drop flowers
And patient, creeping stalk and leaf
Along these barren lines
Where the huge rats scuttle
And the hawk shrieks to the carrion crow.

Can you stay them with your noise?
Then kill winter with your cannon,
Hold back Orion with your bayonets
And crush the spring leaf with your armies!

A RUINED HOUSE

THOSE who lived here are gone
Or dead or desolate with grief;
Of all their life here
Nothing remains
Except their trampled, dirtied clothes
Among the dusty bricks,
Their marriage bed, rusty and bent,
Thrown down aside as useless;
And a broken toy left by their child . . .

BATTLEFIELD

THE WIND is piercing chill
And blows fine grains of snow
Over this shell-rent ground;
Every house in sight
Is smashed and desolate.

But in this fruitless land,
Thorny with wire
And foul with rotting clothes and sacks,
The crosses flourish—
Ci-gît, ci-gît, ci-gît . . .
'Ci-gît 1 soldat Allemand,
Priez pour lui.'

DAUGHTER OF ZEUS
FOR J. C.

NO!
We will not slay the moon,
For she is the fairest of the daughters of Zeus,
Of the maidens of Olympos.

And though she be pale and yet more pale
Gazing upon dead men
And fierce disastrous strife,
Yet for us she is still a frail lily
Floating upon a calm pool—still a tall lady
Comforting our human despair.

LIVING SEPULCHRES

ONE frosty night when the guns were still
I leaned against the trench
Making for myself 'hokku'
Of the moon and flowers and of the snow:

But the ghastly scurrying of huge rats
Swollen with feeding upon men's flesh
Filled me with shrinking dread.

TRENCH IDYLL

WE SAT together in the trench,
He on a lump of frozen earth
Blown in the night before,
I on an unexploded shell;
And smoked and talked, like exiles,
Of how pleasant London was,
Its women, restaurants, night clubs, theatres,
How at that very hour
The taxi-cabs were taking folks to dine . . .
Then we sat silent for a while
As a machine-gun swept the parapet.

Trench Idyll

He said:
'I've been here on and off two years
And seen only one man killed.'

'That's odd'

'The bullet hit him in the throat;
He fell in a heap on the fire-step,
And called out: "My God! dead!"'

'Good Lord, how terrible'!

'Well, as to that, the nastiest job I've had
Was last year on this very front
Taking the discs at night from men
Who'd hung for six months on the wire
Just over there.
The worst of all was
They fell to pieces at a touch
Thank God we couldn't see their faces;
They had gas helmets on . . .'

I shivered;
'It's rather cold here, sir; suppose we move?'

THREE LITTLE GIRLS
FOR MY SISTERS

MARIANNE, Madeline, Alys,
Three little girls I used to see
Two months ago,
Three little girls with fathers killed
And mothers lost,
Three little girls with broken shoes
And hard, sharp coughs,
Three little girls who sold us sweets
Too near the shells,
Three little girls with names of saints
And angels' eyes,
Three little girls where are you now?
Marianne, Madeline, Alys.

A VILLAGE

I

NOW if you saw my village
You'd not think it beautiful,
But flat and commonplace—
As I'd have called it half a year ago . . .

II

But when you've pondered
Hour upon chilly hour in those damned trenches
You get at the significance of things,
Get to know, clearer than before
What a tree means, what a pool,
Or a black, wet field in sunlight.

One gets to know,
In that shell-pierced silence
Under the unmoved, ironic stars,
How good love of the earth is.

So I go strolling,
Hands deep in pockets, head aslant,
And eyes screwed up against the light,
Just loving things
Like any other lunatic or lover.

III

For there's so much to love,
So much to see and understand,
So much naïveté, whimsicality,
Even in a dull village like this.

Pigeons and fowls about a pointed haystack;
The red-tiled barns we sleep in;
The profile of the distant town
Misty against the leaden-silver sky;
Two ragged willows and a fallen elm
With an end of broken wall
Glimmering through evening mist—
All worthy Rembrandt's hand,
Rembrandt who loved homely things . . .

Then there's the rain pool where we wash,
Skimming the film-ice with our tingling hands;
The elm-fringed dykes and solemn placid fields
Flat as a slate and blacker.
There's the church—
The poorest ever built I think—
With all its painted plaster saints
Straight from the Rue St.Sulpice,
Its dreadful painted windows,
And renaissance 'St.Jacques le Majeur'
Over the porch . . .

A Village

IV

To-day the larks are up,
The willow boughs are red with sap,
The last ice melting on the dykes;
One side there stands a row of poplars,
Slender amazons, martial and tall,
And on the other
The sunlight makes the red-tiled roofs deep orange—

And we have come from death,
From the long weary nights and days
Out in those frozen wire-fringed ditches;
And this is life again, rich life—
This poor drab village, lovely in our eyes
As the prince city of Tuscany
Or the crown of Asia, Damascus.

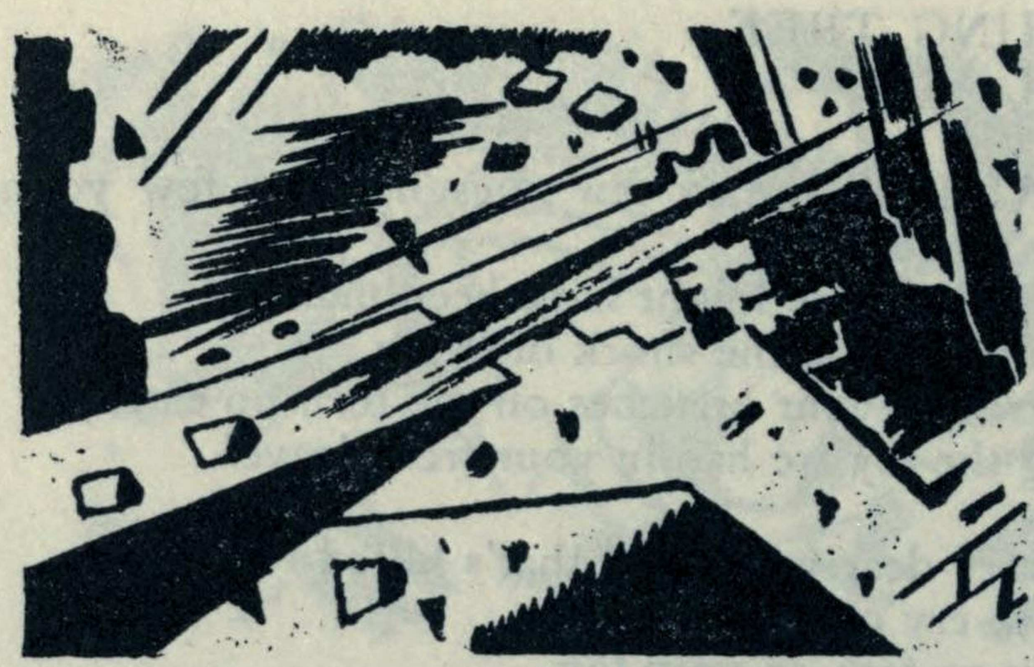
BARRAGE

THUNDER,
The gallop of innumerable Walkyrie impetuous
for battle,
The beating of vast wings above Prometheus,
The contest of tall barbaric gods smitten by the ham-
mer of Thor,
Pursuit! Pursuit! Pursuit!
The huge black dogs of hell
Leaping, full-mouthed, in murderous pursuit!

A YOUNG TREE
FOR J. W.

THERE are so few trees here, so few young trees,
That Fate might have been merciful
And turned aside the shock of flame
That strewed your branches on the torn-up earth,
Ending the joy we had in your fresh leaves.

And every dear young lad that's killed
Seems to cry out:
'We are so few, so very few,
Could not our fate have been more merciful?'



BOMBARDMENT

FOUR days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us;
Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.

The fourth night every man,
Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion,
Slept, muttering and twitching,
While the shells crashed overhead.

Bombardment

The fifth day there came a hush;
We left our holes
And looked above the wreckage of the earth
To where the white clouds moved in silent lines
Across the untroubled blue.

AN EARTH GODDESS AFTER THE ADVANCE 1917

YOU ARE not the august Mother
Nor even one of her comely daughters,
But you gave shelter to men,
Hid birds and little beasts within your hands
And twined flowers in your hair.

Sister, you have been sick of a long fever,
You have been torn with throes
Fiercer than childbirth and yet barren;
You are plague-marked;
There are no flowers in your hair.

An Earth Goddess

I have seen your anguish, O Sister,
I have seen your wounds.
But now there is come upon you peace,
A peace unbroken, profound,
Such as came upon the mother of King Eteocles
When both her sons were dead.
For in your agony, Sister,
When men bruised and ravished you,
You remembered the wide kindness of our mother
And gave shelter to each of them that rent you,
Shielded them from death with your delicate body,
And received their clotted corpses into your once pure
breast.

And now since you have endured,
Since for all your wrong and bitter pain
There came no hatred upon you
But only pity and anguish
Such as the mother of King Eteocles felt
Gazing upon her two angry sons—
Because of this, your peace is wonderful.

Underfoot are a few scant grasses
Amid rusty ruin;
Overhead the last of your larks
Cries shrilly before the broken clouds;

And for your sake, O my sister,
O daughter of our great Earth-Mother,
Because of your old pain
And long-suffering and sweetness,
Because of the new peace
Which lies so deep upon you,
The chains of my bitterness are broken,
The weight of my despair leaves me.

SOLILOQUY I

NO, I'm not afraid of death,
(Not very much afraid, that is)
Either for others or myself;
Can watch them coming from the line
On the wheeled silent stretchers
And not shrink,
But munch my sandwich stoically
And make a joke when 'it' has passed.

But—the way they wobble!—
God! that makes one sick.
Dead men should be so still, austere,
And beautiful,
Not wobbling carrion roped upon a cart . . .

Well, thank God for rum.

SOLILOQUY II

I WAS WRONG, quite wrong;
The dead men are not always carrion . . .
After the advance,
As we went through the shattered trenches
Which the enemy had left,
We found, lying upon the fire-step,
A dead English soldier,
His head bloodily bandaged
And his closed left hand touching the earth.

More beautiful than one can tell,
More subtly coloured than a perfect Goya,
And more austere and lovely in repose
Than Angelo's hand could ever carve in stone.

H. S. R.
(Died of wounds, April, 1917)

YOU ARE DEAD—
You, the kindly, courteous,
You whom we loved,
You who harmed no man
Yet were brave to death
And died that other men might live.

Far purer, braver lips than mine should praise you,
Far nobler hands than mine record your loss,
Yet since your courteous high valour scorned no man,
I, who but loved you from the depths, can greet you,
Salute your grave and murmur, 'Brother,
Hail and farewell! You are dead.'

E. T.
(Died of wounds, May, 1917)

YOU TOO ARE DEAD,
The coarse and ignorant,
Carping against all that was too high
For your poor spirit to grasp,
Cruel and evil-tongued—
Yet you died without a moan or whimper.

O, not I, not I should dare to judge you!
But rather leave with tears your grave
Where the sweet grass will cover all your faults
And all your courage too.

Brother, hail and farewell!

MACHINE GUNS

GOLD FLASHES in the dark,
And on the road
Each side, behind, in front of us,
Gold sparks
Where the fierce bullets strike the stones.

In a near shell-hole lies a wounded man,
The stretcher-bearers bending over him;
And at our feet
Cower shrinkingly against the ground
Dark shadowy forms of men.

Only we two stand upright;
All differences of life and character smoothed out
And nothing left
Save that one foolish tie of caste
That will not let us shrink.

PICKET

DUSK and deep silence . . .
Three soldiers huddled on a bench
Over a red-hot brazier,
And a fourth who stands apart
Watching the cold rainy dawn.

Then the familiar sound of birds—
Clear cock-crow, caw of rooks,
Frail pipe of linnet, the 'ting! ting!' of chaffinches,
And over all the lark
Outpiercing even the robin . . .

Wearily the sentry moves
Muttering the one word: 'Peace.'

TERROR

I

THOSE of the earth envy us,
Envy our beauty and frail strength;
Those of the wind and the moon
Envy our pain.

II

For as a doe that has never born child
We were swift to fly from terror;
And as fragile edged steel
We turned, we pierced, we endured.

III

We have known terror:
The terror of the wind and silent shadows,
The terror of great heights,
The terror of the worm,
The terror of thunder and fire,
The terror of water and slime,
The terror of horror and fear,
The terror of desire and pain—
The terror of apathy.

IV

As a beast, as an arrow of pine,
Terror cleft us,
Tore us in envy away,
So that for month upon month
Pain wore us, hope left us, despair clutched us.
For they of the earth envied us,
Envied our beauty and strength.

V

Yet because, though we faltered and wept,
We held fast, clung close to our love,
Scorned hate even as they scorned us,
Some god has lightened our lives,
Given back the cool mouth of song,
The mouth crushed like a flower
Which unpetals in marvellous ways.

VI

We have suffered, we have bled,
And those of the wind and the moon
Envy our pain, the pain of the terror,
The delight no terror could slay.

APATHY

COME down the road and do not speak.
You cannot know how strange it is
To walk upon a grey firm road again,
To feel the noiseless waves of air break on one's flesh.

You do not speak, you do not look at me;
Just walk in silence on the grey firm road
Guessing my mood by instinct, not by thought—
For there is no weapon of tongue or glance
So keen that it can stir my apathy,
Can stab that bitterness to hope,
Can pierce that humour to despair.

Silence fits the mood then—silence and you.

The trees beside the road—can you interpret
These fragments of leaf-music,
Here a phrase, and here a sort of melody
That dies to silence or is broken
By a full rustling that is discord?
Can you interpret such a simple thing?

Can I interpret this blank apathy,
This humourous bitterness?

Lean on the bridge now—do not speak—
And watch the coloured water slipping past,

Apathy

While I struggle with myself,
Confront half-impulses, half-desires,
Grapple with lustreless definitions,
Grin at my inarticulate impotence
And so fall back on—apathy!

The bridge has three curved spans,
Is made of weathered stones,
And rests upon two diamond-pointed piers—
Is picturesque.
(I have not lost all touch and taste for life,
See beauty just as keenly, relish things.)
The water here is black and specked with white;
Under that tree the shallows grow to brown,
Light amber where the sunlight straggles through—
But yet, what colour is it if you watch the reeds
Or if you only see the trees' reflection?

Flat on the surface rest the lily leaves
(Some curled up inwards, though, like boats)
And yellow heads thrust up on fine green throats.
Two—three—a dozen—watch now—demoiselle flies
Flicker and flutter and dip and rest
Their beryl-green or blue, dark Prussian blue frail wings
On spits and threads of water-plant.

Apathy

Notice all carefully, be precise, welcome the world.
Do I miss these things? Overlook beauty?
Not even the shadow of a bird
Passing across that white reflected cloud.

And yet there's always something else—
The way one corpse held its stiff yellow fingers
And pointed, pointed to the huge dark hole
Gouged between ear and jaw right to the skull . . .

Did I startle you? What was the matter?
Just a joke they told me yesterday,
Really, really, not for ladies' ears.
Forgive me; I'll not laugh so suddenly again.

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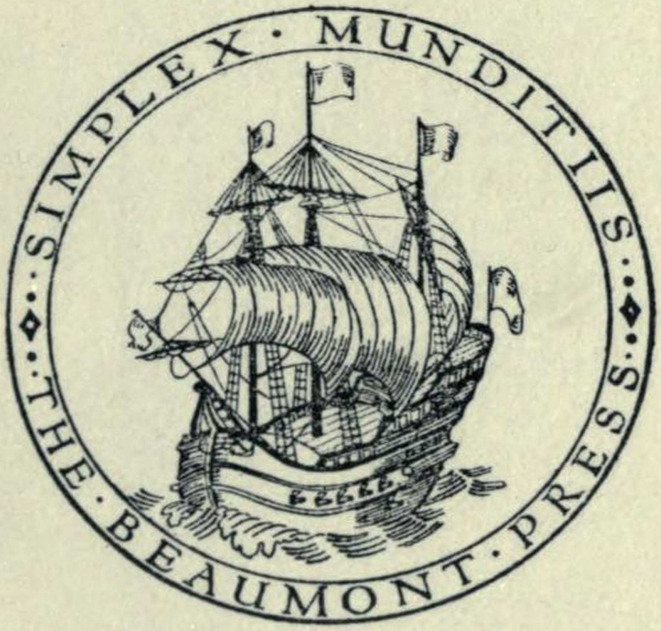

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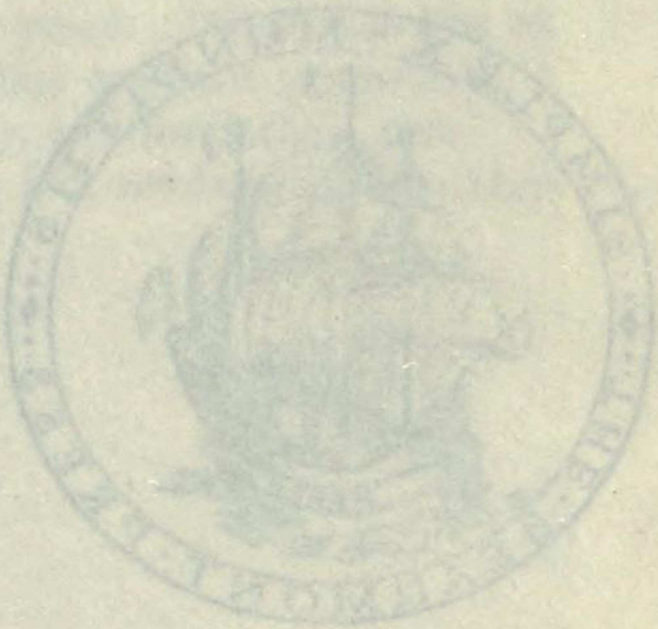

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